

# **Elk Management in 5 Western States**

(Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, and Utah)



***A CHALLENGE FOR US ALL!***



# Elk Management in Other States:

## What has been tried, and what is the result?

Each state differs in terms of:

- ◆ elk numbers & distribution;
- ◆ private/public land ownership;
- ◆ land/habitat composition;
- ◆ politics and regulatory controls;
- ◆ agency approach to elk management;

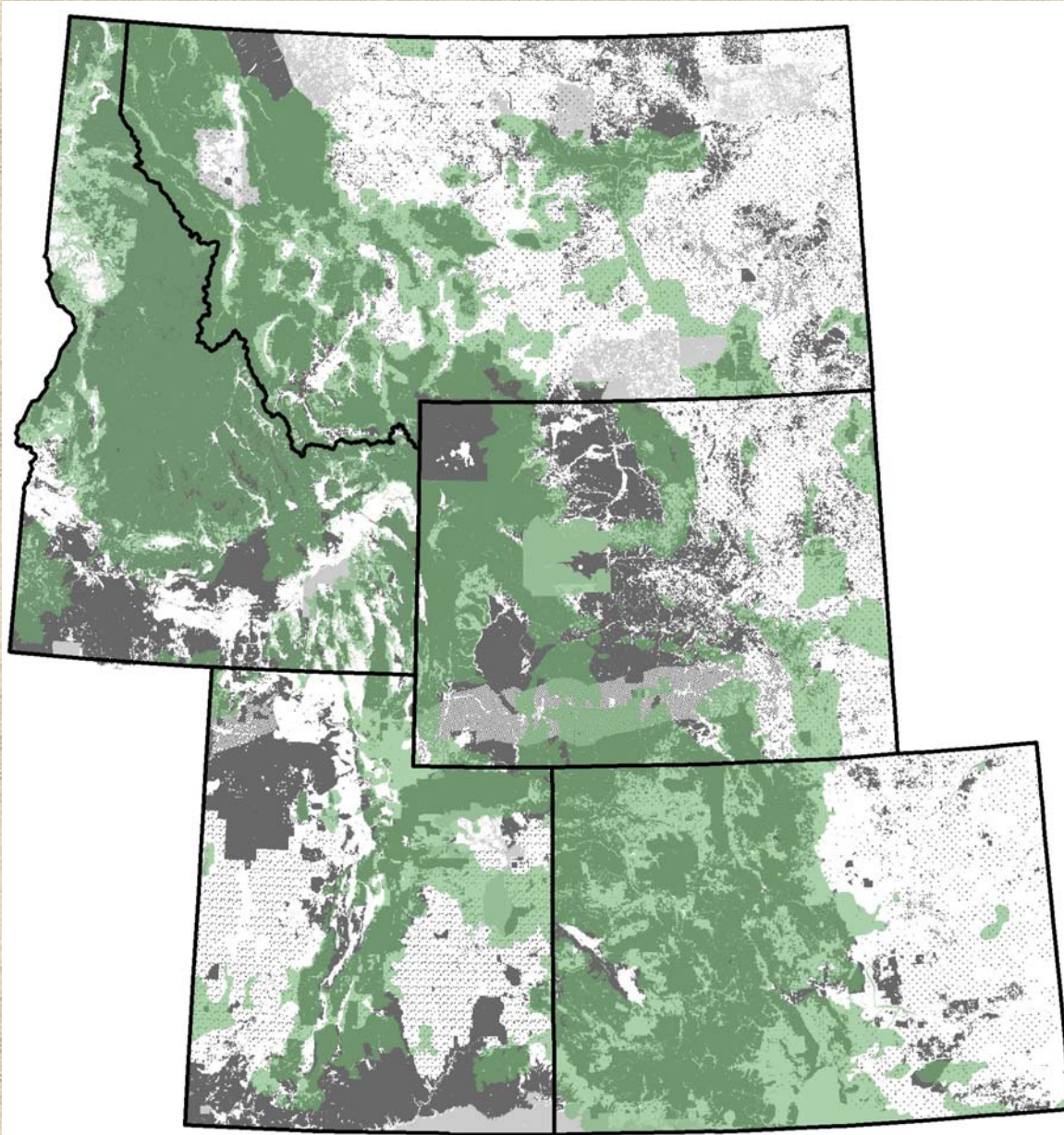
Yet all states share the challenge of managing wild free-ranging North American elk, or wapiti.

Alan Charles, Coordinator of Landowner/Sportsman Relations





# Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado



**Green = ELK**

**Black = public land**

**White = private  
land;**

**Gray = tribal land;**

*5 states' estimated total  
elk population = 675,000  
– 700,000 elk*



# Elk Management Information



- Current elk population numbers and status;
- Elk distribution across private and public land;
- Elk hunting regulation package – seasons and license/permit types;
- Elk management programs and results of those programs;

# Elk Management or People Management?

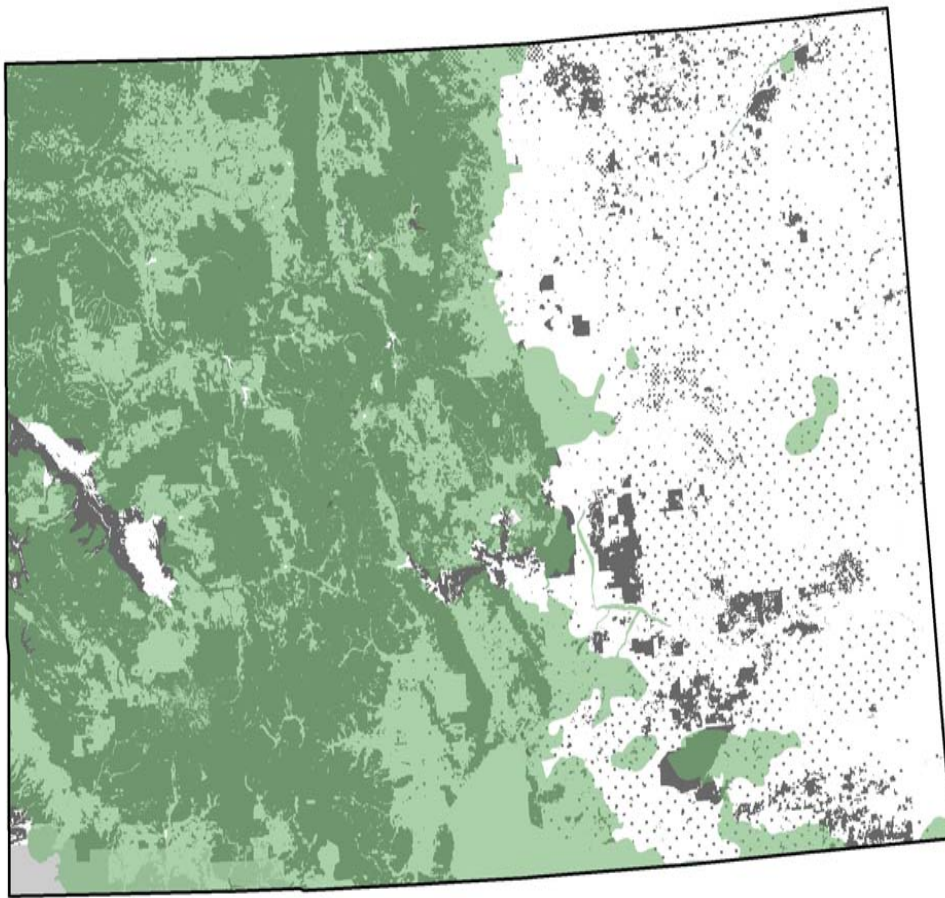




# Colorado

Estimated elk population: 250,000 – 260,000;

10%-15% above population management objective *(have been over objective for 20+ years)*;



- 35% of state is private land; 75% of elk spend summer on public land, many move to private fall and winter;
- Choose your weapon, then choose your season;
- 250,000 total elk licenses; 37% nonresident;
- Unlimited nonresident bull elk licenses for 2 of 4 rifle hunts; unlimited nonresident either-sex archery elk licenses;
- 30 day archery season with 7 day muzzleloader season over top;
- 4 rifle hunts, range from 5 – 12 days, 1<sup>st</sup> week of October – 2d week of November;
- Sep 1 – Jan 31: Private land cow-only hunts focused on population control;

## White River-Flat Tops Region

*An example of elk management challenge faced by all 5 states*

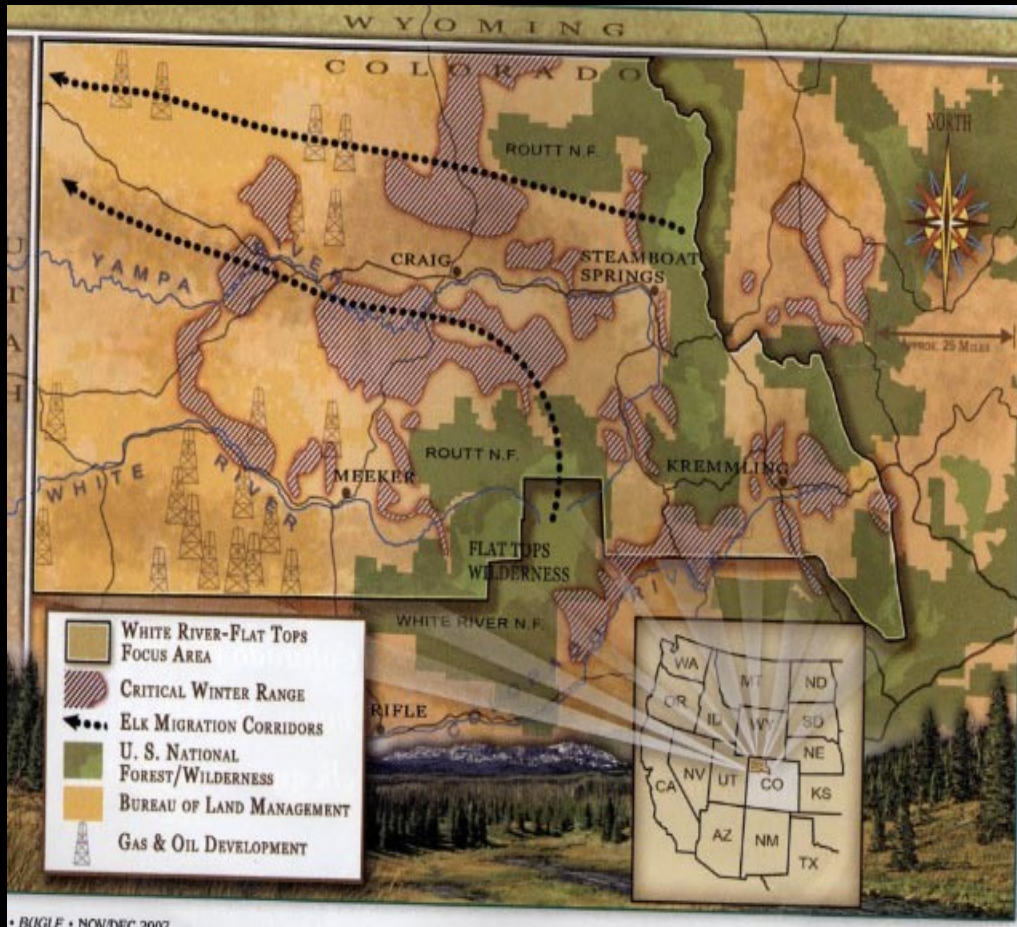
Home to largest migratory elk herd on earth – 40,000 elk;

Building permits up 100% in last 5 years;

Meeker – 3,000 people; 20 year population projection: 100,000;

Next 20 years: 3,500 new oil & gas wells on private and state lands; 3,000 new wells on federal lands;

Winter range and migratory corridors threatened;







# Colorado – Ranching for Wildlife Program



# Colorado – Ranching for Wildlife Program

- niche-type program, 23 ranches, couple thousand permits of more than 250,000 total elk licenses;
- minimum of 12,000 acres for enrollment;
- agency & landowners develop habitat/management plan;
- landowner receives ability to sell X number of guaranteed license hunts in exchange for allowing x number of public hunters to hunt on property;
- most bull licenses to landowners, cows and few bull permits to public;
- benefits include landowner income from fee hunters, “high-quality” trophy hunts for a few non-paying bull hunters, and public cow hunts;
- controversial with resident hunters and landowners who do not qualify for enrollment;





# Colorado- Habitat Partnership Program



# Colorado – Habitat Partnership Program

- Begun in early 1990's;
- Local committees in each elk herd district;
- Committees include landowners, hunters, agency staff;
- Committee budgets (\$2 million +) from elk license revenue;
- Committees deal with big game conflicts (habitat & access);
- Projects include habitat enhancement (burning, water development, weeds, etc), fencing, and administering early/late hunts designed to redistribute and harvest elk;
- Program successful in gaining landowner tolerance for high numbers of elk;



*“For many years, the agency was very conservative with cow tags; recent efforts to increase cow harvest to reduce elk numbers has required a cultural shift, both within the agency and with the public...”*

*In parts of Colorado, fee hunting is a fact of life; the only way we can get landowners to help out with cow harvest is if those hunts take place before or after hunts where landowners can charge fees for the hunting of bulls...”*

Rick Kahn, Wildlife Management Supervisor, 30+ years with Colorado Division of Wildlife

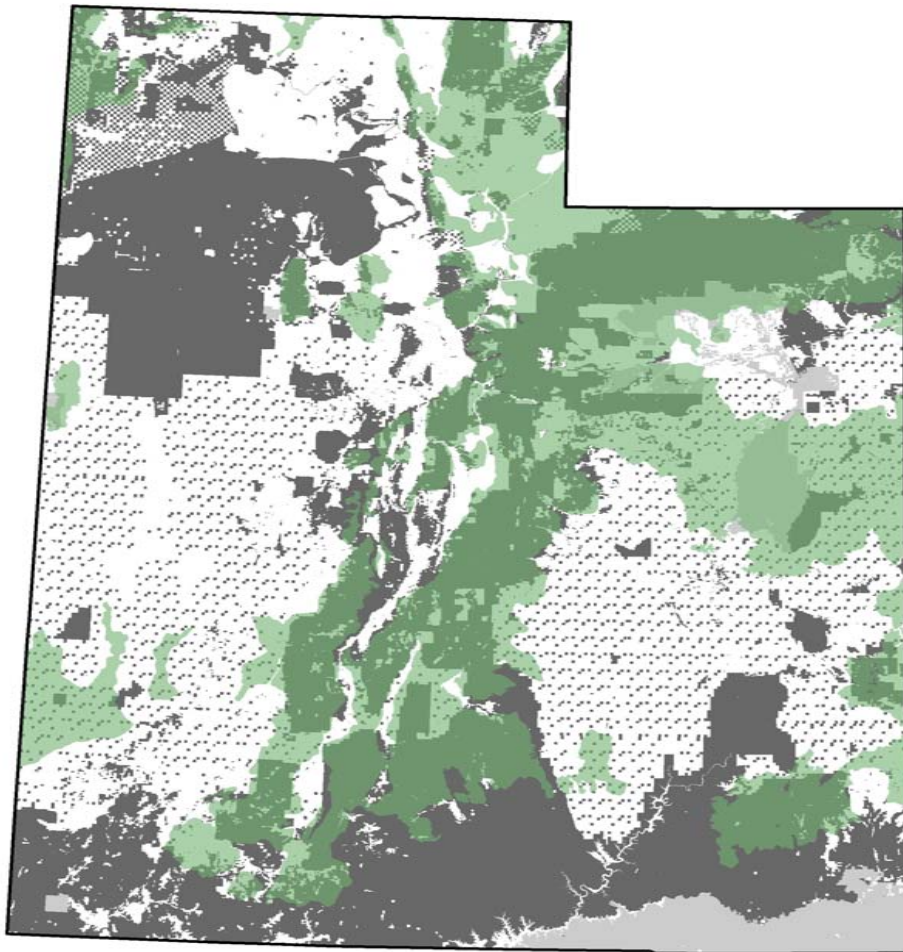


# Colorado



# Utah

Estimated elk population: 63,000; under statewide objective of 68,400, but over objective in many units, primarily those with much private land;



- 70% of state is public land; 30% of elk reside mostly on private land;
- Choose your weapon;
- 13-day seasons, start 1<sup>st</sup> week of October, 4 types of seasons;
- Some units – any bull – mostly private land or wilderness;
- Some units – spike bull on public with limited trophy bulls;
- Some units – limited entry trophy bull;
- Cow harvest – generally later – end of November – end of January;





**Utah** – [Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit \(CWMU\) Program](#)




# Utah – Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit Program

- Minimum of 10,000 contiguous acres (most private, may include public);
- Management Plan approved by agency and wildlife board (commission);
- Landowner(s) allocated x number of vouchers (used to obtain licenses, generally for fee hunters) with x number of public hunters authorized to hunt CWMU without fee;
- Most bull hunting reserved for fee hunters; “public” hunters receive a few bull hunts and most cow hunts;
- Some elk herd districts with CWMU properties are over objective due to lack of adequate cow harvest on CWMU; new rules require mandatory cow elk harvest objective, must be met within 3-year period or potential reduction in bull elk license allocation;
- Agency considers program successful in terms of encouraging landowners to provide wildlife habitat and providing high quality hunting opportunities;
- Some resident hunters and landowners who do not qualify for inclusion in CWMU do not support the program;



# Utah

A photograph of a herd of elk running across a lush green field. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. The elk are in motion, running from left to right. The field is vibrant green, and there's a line of bushes or trees in the middle ground.

*“Access to private lands is the biggest problem in trying to manage elk populations at population management objectives...Some CWMU managers do not agree with the agency on how many cow elk need harvested to meet population management objectives...the agency is starting to apply more pressure in recent years to bring these CWMU’s into compliance with area management objectives...”*

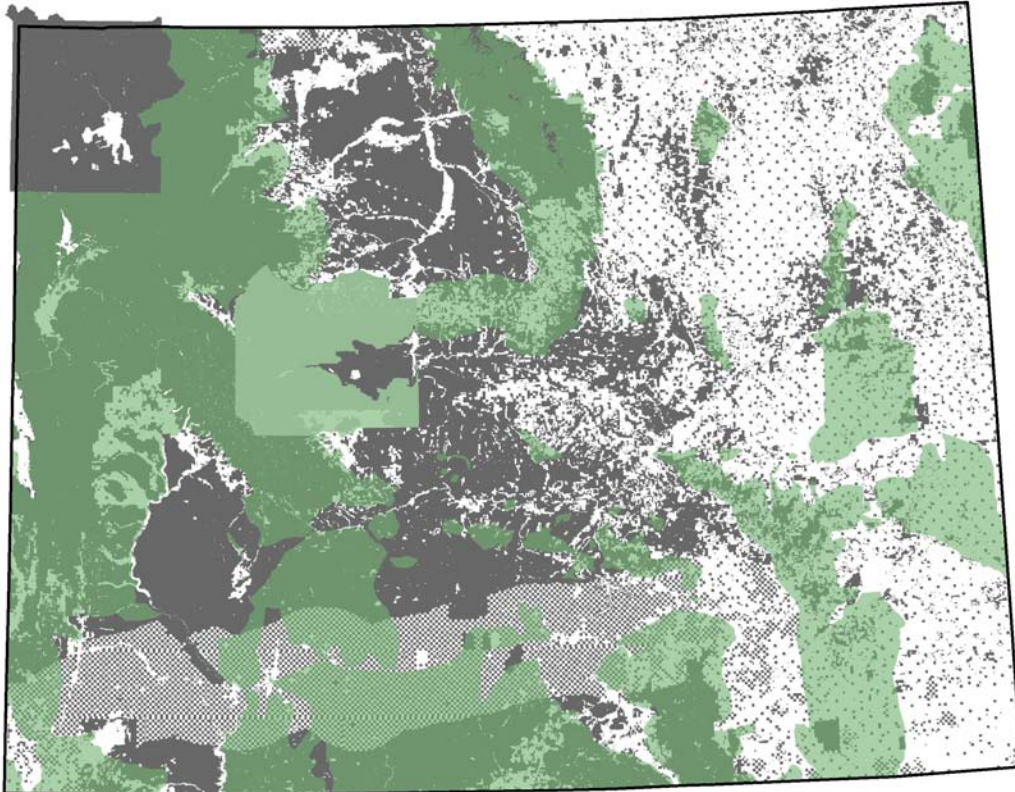
Anise Auode, Big Game Coordinator, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources:



# Wyoming

Estimated elk population: 90,000;

Above statewide population objective: Of 35 elk herds, 19 above objective, 1 below objective, 8 at objective, 7 incomplete data;



- 50% of state is private land;
- Most elk summer on public land, winter on private land;
- No choose your weapon requirement;
- Standardized archery seasons – 15-30 day; mix of general season and limited quota hunts;
- Nonresident elk licenses capped at 7,520, with provisions for issuance of leftover tags in addition;



# Wyoming

## ACCESSYES Private Lands Public Wildlife Program



- Began in 1998 – consists of Walk-In Hunting or Fishing Areas, Hunter Management Areas, or Wildlife Enhancement Areas;
- Resembles early MT Block Management and Upland Bird Habitat Enhancement programs;
- Funded through donations; FY06 funding: \$125,960:
- 2006 – provided access to 2.6 million acres, mostly public land;



# Wyoming –

## Landowner Redeemable Big Game Coupons



- Original intent was to encourage public access, offset potential game damage; program in place for 30+ years;
- Landowner can redeem \$12.50 coupon for each animal harvested on private land;
- Significant income for some landowners, others don't use it;



# Wyoming

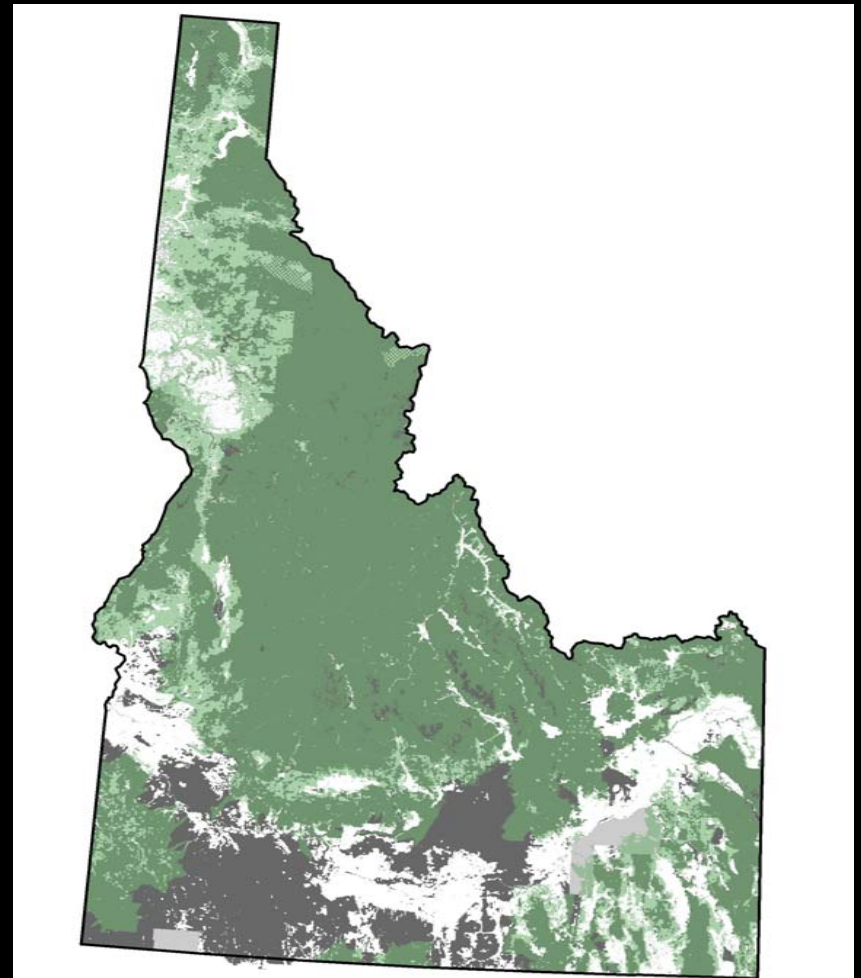


*“Nowadays, access is THE issue in terms of managing big game animals...a major problem is elk that spend summers high on public land, and move immediately to private land at lower elevations within the 1<sup>st</sup> hour of the 1<sup>st</sup> day of hunting season...more and more of these private lands are owned by ‘new-age’ landowners who don’t allow public hunting...* Reg Rothwell, Supervisor of Biological Services, 30+ years with Wyoming Game & Fish:

# Idaho

Estimated elk population: 125,000; close to statewide population management objective; problem is distribution; social not biological issue of too many elk either on ag lands or on traditional mule deer winter range, possibly decreasing number of mule deer in those areas;

- 63% of state is public land;
- Most elk reside on public land;
- Hunters must choose 1 of 29 specific hunt zones in which to hunt, with great variability in length of zone seasons, weapons restrictions, hunt opportunity, etc.
- Nonresident elk hunters limited – 10% of limited entry, 12,815 general season hunt;
- Exceptionally high bull/cow management objectives, range from 18/100 – 35/100;





# Idaho



- 29 management zones; hunters may only hunt in 1;
- “Choose your zone” system works to shift hunter distribution by offering attractive season packages in those areas requiring more harvest, especially cow elk;
- Some zones offer seasons which range from Aug 30 – Dec 19, requiring use of primitive weapons during much of that time;
- “Choose your zone” system in place for 10 years, is primary method used to control elk harvest.



# Idaho – Other “programs” which may affect elk management

- Landowner permission hunts – require hunters to secure landowner permission before receiving antlerless elk tag (*similar to MT A7-tag*) – hunters not restricted to hunting only on that landowner’s land;
- Landowner Appreciation tags – originally intended to recognize owners who provide habitat and access; no public access required; tags may be transferred; supported by landowners; opposed by resident hunters;
- Some general season cow elk rifle hunting (up to 5 weeks);
- 2<sup>nd</sup> elk tag – antlerless elk;





# Idaho



*“Elk always seem to outperform whatever we throw at them...Idaho is lucky in that we have vast areas where elk winter range is also on public land...Elk numbers are generally very healthy...managers are concerned about some herds, primarily in the wolf-rich north-central part of the state. Brad Compton, state big game manager, Idaho Game and Fish*



# Montana

Estimated elk population: 130,00 – 160,000;

14% over statewide objective; 60 % of Elk Management Units (EMU) are above population management objectives;

64% of Montana is private land;

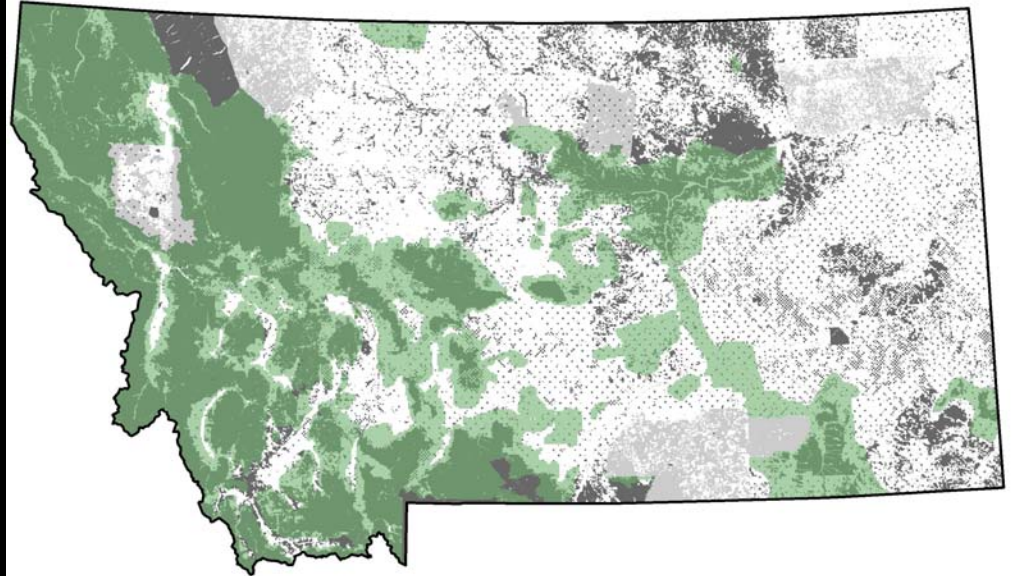
Elk distribution is approximately 60% on public land, 37% on private land, 3% on tribal land;

Elk Season: 6 week archery-only;  
5 week general gun;

General elk license: unlimited resident;  
17,000 nonresident;

Special permits: limited either-sex or  
antlerless permits by drawing only;

2d antlerless elk license (A9/B12) –  
available over the counter or by  
drawing;



# Montana – elk management ACCESS challenges

*“FWP biologists estimate that up to 35% of Montana’s elk may be on private lands that are not available to public hunters during the 5-week general season.”*

2005 FWP Elk Plan

- Hunter access is also affected by weather, type of access desired (motorized/non-motorized), willingness to pay fee, and hunter’s elk hunting abilities;
- Hunter habits have changed;
- Land ownership and land management has changed;
- Elk numbers and distribution have increased statewide;





# Montana

Hunting Access Enhancement Program

**BMA #** \_\_\_\_\_

## Hunting with Written Permission Only.

**Contact:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



This Program funded by Resident and Nonresident Hunters.



# Montana – Block Management Hunting Access Program

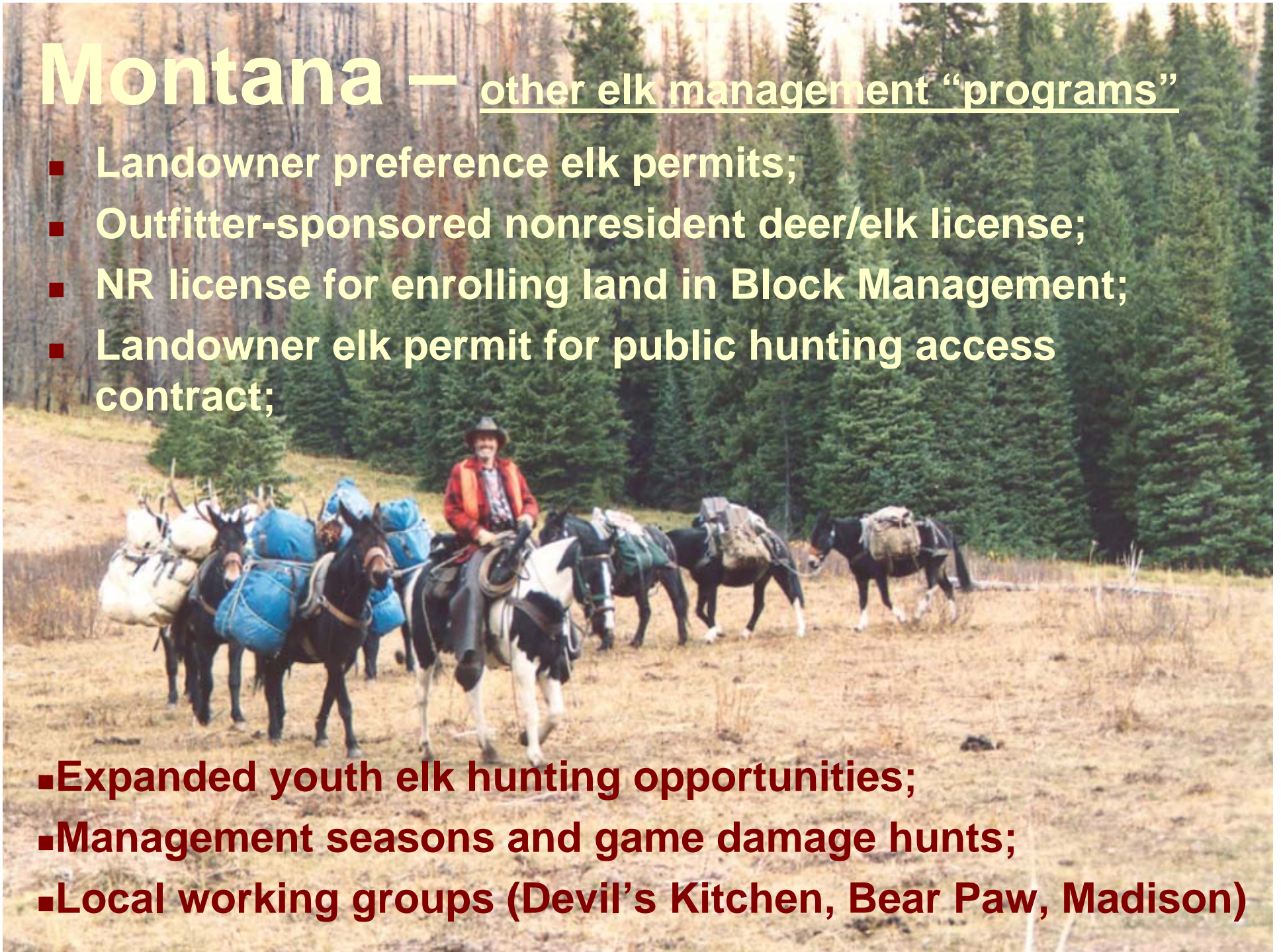
- Began in 1985; enhanced in 1995;
- Designed to provide incentives to landowners who allow public hunting without charge (incentives include compensation and services);
- 2007 – 1258 landowners enroll 8.2 million acres;
  - 440,000+ hunter days of hunting provided;
  - \$4.1 million in landowner payments
  - \$2 million in hunter management services/program operations;
- 5 sources of program funding(FY07/2006 season):
  - outfitter-sponsored nonresident elk/deer license (72%);
  - nonresident upland bird license (6%);
  - Hunting Access Enhancement Fee (13%);
  - Supertag chances (5%);
  - federal PR funds (5%);



# Montana — other elk management “programs”

- Landowner preference elk permits;
- Outfitter-sponsored nonresident deer/elk license;
- NR license for enrolling land in Block Management;
- Landowner elk permit for public hunting access contract;

- Expanded youth elk hunting opportunities;
- Management seasons and game damage hunts;
- Local working groups (Devil’s Kitchen, Bear Paw, Madison)





# Montana

*“It is easy to focus on season structure. Season structure can address allocation of the resource and limit resource exploitation. Structure can also define harvest potential. But a focus on structure without consideration of access is insufficient. The presence or absence of access can facilitate or limit any season structure’s harvest potential.”*

Quentin Kujala, Wildlife Management Bureau Chief, Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks



## *So what can we learn from the collective experiences of 5 western states' efforts to manage elk?*



- Hunters are the primary tool for managing elk numbers;
- To kill elk, hunters have to have access to elk;
- Many factors may affect access;
- Private land access affects elk herd management;

# Conclusions

- No state has a “silver bullet;”
- Each state has developed programs or regulatory methods which attempt to address elk management issues on a mix of public and private land;
- All states have programs which face controversy or lack support from one or more constituent groups;



# CONCLUSIONS

**All states face challenges managing elk populations in areas involving private land and multiple ownerships;**

**In every state, where all parties (landowners/hunters/outfitters, and agency) cannot agree on management goals, elk populations often exceed management objectives;**

***HOW DO MONTANA CITIZENS WANT MONTANA ELK MANAGED...  
NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE?***

